

# Why Great Powers Fight Small Wars Badly

Major Robert M. Cassidy, U.S. Army

*I will be damned if I will permit the U.S. Army, its institutions, its doctrine, and its traditions to be destroyed just to win this lousy war.<sup>1</sup>*

*Organizational structures that encourage the presentation of innovative proposals and their careful reviews make innovation less likely.<sup>2</sup>*

THESE QUOTES ENGENDER two truisms about the military organizations of great powers: they embrace the big-war paradigm, and because they are large, hierarchical institutions, they generally innovate incrementally. This means that great-power militaries do not innovate well, particularly when the required innovations and adaptations lie outside the scope of conventional war. In other words, great powers do not win small wars because they are great powers: their militaries must maintain a central competence in symmetric warfare to preserve their great-power status vis-à-vis other great powers; and their militaries must be large organizations. These two characteristics combine to create a formidable competence on the plains of Europe or the deserts of Iraq. However, these two traits do not produce institutions and cultures that exhibit a propensity for counterguerrilla warfare.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to a big-war culture, there are some contradictions that derive from the logic that exists when a superior industrial or postindustrial power faces an inferior, semifeudal, semicolonial, or preindustrial adversary. On one hand, the great power intrinsically brings overwhelmingly superior resources and technology to this type of conflict. On the other hand, the seemingly inferior opponent generally exhibits superior

*Historically, great powers have fought small wars and counter-insurgencies badly. They do not lose them so much as they fail to win them. Cassidy considers historical instances of this phenomenon and concludes that asymmetry in strategy, technology, or national will creates an Achilles heel for great powers.*

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*The American Revolution witnessed some of the best unconventional and guerrilla fighting in the history of American warfare.*

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*In the Southern Department, General Nathanael Greene combined conventional with unconventional tactics to wear down Major General Cornwallis. Greene*

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will, demonstrated by a willingness to accept higher costs and to persevere against many odds. "Victory or Death" is not simply a statement on a bumper sticker; it is a dilemma that embodies asymmetric conflicts. The qualitatively or quantitatively inferior opponent fights with limited means for a strategic objective—independence. Conversely, the qualitatively or quantitatively superior opponent fights with potentially unlimited means for limited ends—maintaining some peripheral territory or outpost. Seemingly weaker military forces often prevail over those with superior firepower and technology because they are fighting for survival.<sup>4</sup>

History offers many examples of big-power failures in the context of asymmetric conflict: the Romans in the Teutoburg Forest, the British in the American Revolution, the French in the Peninsular War, the French in Indochina and Algeria, the Americans in Vietnam, the Russians in Afghanistan and Chechnya, and the Americans in Somalia. This list is not entirely homogeneous, and it is important to clarify that the American Revolution, the Peninsular War, and the Vietnam war are examples of great powers failing to win against strategies that combined asymmetric approaches with symmetric approaches.

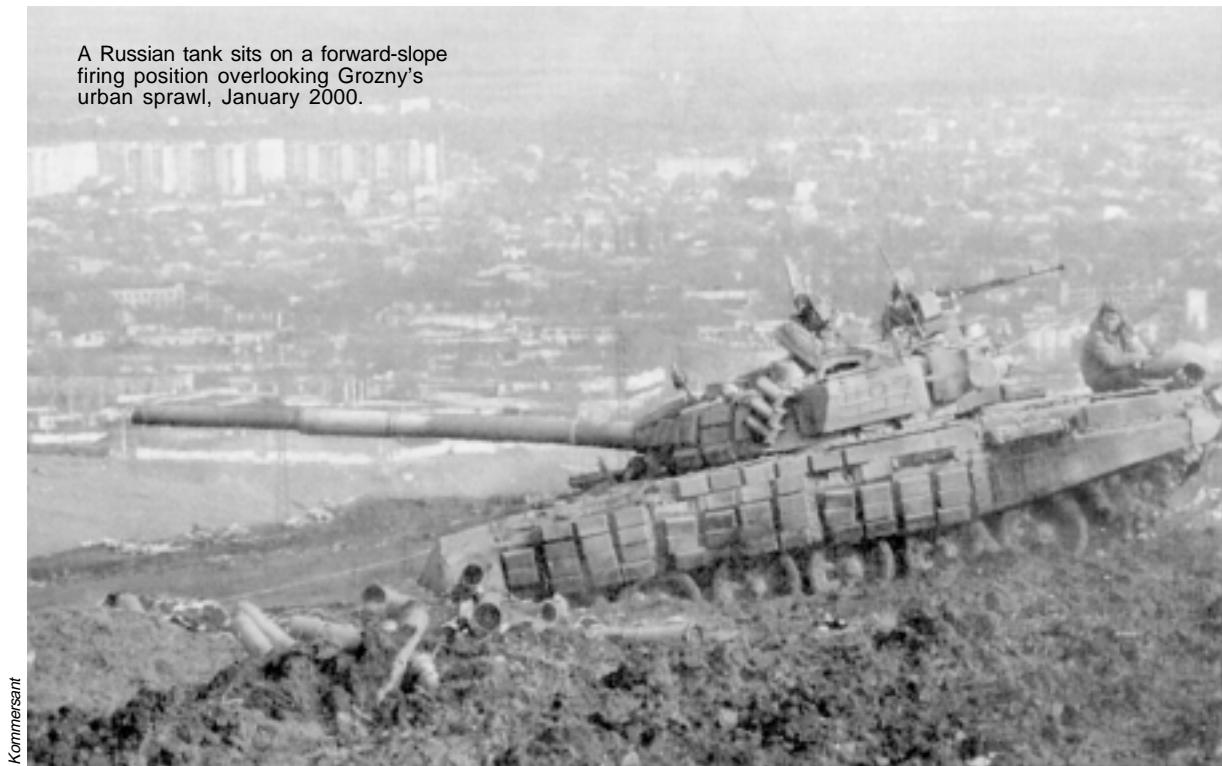
However, two qualifications are necessary when generalizing great powers' failures in small wars. First, big powers do not necessarily lose small wars; they simply fail to win them. In fact, they often win many tactical victories on the battlefield. However, in the absence of a threat to survival, the big powers' failure to quickly and decisively attain their strategic aim causes them to lose domestic support. Second, weaker opponents must be strategically circumspect enough to avoid confronting the great powers symmetrically in conventional wars.

History also recounts many examples wherein big powers achieved crushing victories over small powers when the inferior sides were injudicious enough to fight battles or wars according to the big-power paradigm. The Battle of the Pyramids and the Battle of Omdurman provide the most conspicuous examples of primitive militaries facing advanced militaries symmetrically. The Persian Gulf war is the most recent example of an outmatched military force fighting according to its opponent's preferred paradigm. The same was true for the Italians' victory in Abyssinia, about which Mao Tse-tung observed that defeat is the inevitable result when semifeudal forces fight positional warfare and pitched battles against modernized forces.<sup>5</sup>

Asymmetric conflict is the most probable form of conflict that the United States may face. Four factors support this probability:

- The Western Powers have the world's most advanced militaries in technology and firepower.
- The economic and political homogenization among the Western Powers precludes a war among them.
- Most rational adversaries in the non-Western world should have learned from the Gulf war not to confront the West on its terms.
- As a result, the United States and its European allies will employ their firepower and technology in the less-developed world against ostensibly inferior adversaries employing asymmetric approaches.

Asymmetric conflict will therefore be the norm, not the exception. Even though the war in Afghanistan departs from the model of asymmetric conflict presented in this article, the asymmetric nature of the



war there only underscores the salience of asymmetric conflicts.<sup>6</sup>

The term “asymmetric conflict” first appeared in a paper as early as 1974, and it has become the strategic term de jour.<sup>7</sup> However, the term “asymmetric” has come to include so many approaches that it has lost its utility and clarity. For example, one article described Japan’s World War II direct attack on Pearl Harbor as conventional but its indirect attack against British conventional forces in Singapore as asymmetric. So encompassing a definition diminishes the term’s utility. If every type of asymmetry or indirect approach is subsumed within this definition, then what approaches are excluded?

This article circumscribes the scope of asymmetric conflict to analyze conflicts in which either national or multinational superior external military forces confront inferior states or indigenous groups in the latter’s territory. Insurgencies and small wars lie within this category, and this article uses both terms interchangeably. Small wars are not big, force-on-force, state-on-state, conventional, orthodox, unambiguous wars in which success is measured by phase lines crossed or hills seized. Small wars are counterinsurgencies and low-intensity conflicts in which ambiguity rules and superior firepower does not necessarily guarantee success.

### Asymmetry in Strategy

*The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.<sup>8</sup>*

Symmetric wars are total wars wherein there is a zero-sum struggle for survival by both sides—World Wars I and II are the most obvious examples. An asymmetric struggle implies that the war for the indigenous insurgents is total but that it is inherently limited for the great power. This is because the insurgents pose no direct threat to the great power’s

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survival. Moreover, for the great power in an asymmetric situation, full military mobilization is neither politically prudent nor militarily necessary. The disparity in military capabilities is so great and the confidence that military power will predominate is so acute that the great power expects victory. However, although the inferior side possesses limited means, its aim is nonetheless the expulsion of the great power. The choice for the underdog is literally victory or death.

After the Continental Army unsuccessfully defended New York in 1776 and Brandywine Creek, Philadelphia, in 1777, Washington was compelled to adopt a Fabian strategy. Fabius Maximus was a Roman consul charged with defending Rome against Hannibal. According to B. H. Liddell Hart, Fabius' strategy "was not merely an evasion of battle to gain time, but calculated for its effect on the morale of the enemy."<sup>9</sup> Fabius knew his enemy's military superiority too well to risk a decision in direct battle. Thus, Fabius sought to avoid direct battle against superior Carthaginian-led concentrations and instead protracted the war by "military pin-pricks to wear down the invaders' endurance."<sup>10</sup>

Like Fabius against Hannibal, Washington generally avoided head-on collisions with the British Army. Since Washington's army was limited in personnel, resources, and training, he soon realized that committing his troops to open battle against the British would be disastrous. Washington adopted an indirect strategy of attrition by avoiding general actions against the British main body and concentrating what forces he had against weak enemy outposts and isolated detachments. Washington's plan for victory was to keep the revolution alive by preserving the Continental Army and by exhausting the British will to sustain the fight with raids against peripheral detachments. Washington's political objective was to remove the British from the American colonies, but his military means were so weak that "Washington's hopes had to lie mainly not in military victory but in the possibility that the political opposition in Great Britain might in time force the British Ministry to abandon the conflict."<sup>11</sup>

The American Revolution witnessed some of the best unconventional and guerrilla fighting in the history of American warfare. In the Northern Department, irregulars helped bring about the surrender of British Major General John Burgoyne's army at Saratoga by conducting unconventional hit-and-run attacks on Burgoyne's flanks and lines of communication. In the Southern Department, General Nathanael Greene combined conventional with unconventional tactics to wear down Major General Lord Charles Cornwallis. Greene "developed a capacity to weave together guerrilla operations and those of his regular forces with a skill that makes him not unworthy of comparison with Mao Tse-tung or Vo Nguyen Giap."<sup>12</sup> In part, Greene's strategy stemmed from the shortage of provisions for his regulars and from the presence of partisan bands in the Southern Department.

### **Asymmetry in Technology**

*For the Chechens an outright military victory was unlikely, so their goal was to inflict as many casualties as possible on the Russian people and erode their will to fight. The Chechens used an 'asymmetric' strategy that avoided battle in the open against Russian armor, artillery, and air power. They sought to even the fight by fight-*



US Marine Corps

ing an infantry war. Time and again, the Chechens forced their Russian counterparts to meet them on the urban battlefield where a Russian infantryman could die just as easily.<sup>13</sup>

Asymmetry in technology stems from a huge disparity in technological and industrial capacities between adversaries in asymmetric conflicts. The disparity inheres in the structure of any conflict that witnesses a peripheral power facing a core power. Not only does conventional military and technological superiority not ensure victory, it may even undermine victory in an asymmetric context. One need only ask a veteran of the 1995 Battle of Grozny how superior numbers and technology fare against a guileful opponent using an asymmetric approach.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian forces that assaulted Grozny on 31 December 1994 were technologically and quantitatively superior to their Chechen defenders. Perhaps the Russian military's perception of its own invulnerability, stemming from a numerical and technological superiority, contributed to the haphazard manner by which it ambled into a beehive of Chechen antiaarmor ambushes. In raw numbers, the Russians employed 230 tanks, 454 armored infantry vehicles, and 388 artillery guns. The Chechens, on the other hand, had 50 tanks, 100 armored infantry vehicles, and 60 artillery guns. Despite Russia's superior weapon systems, the Russians were unable to maneuver the Chechens into a disadvantageous position. Despite former Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev's claim that he could topple the Dудаев regime in a couple of hours with one

**Army Special Forces initially met with some success using proven counterinsurgency techniques such as aggressive small-unit patrolling, intelligence gathering, and winning hearts and minds. . . . Moreover, the U.S. Marines . . . employed similar techniques with their combined actions platoons, achieving local success for most of the war. . . . General Westmoreland's team tended to marginalize both . . . because [they] were inconsistent with his concept of the U.S. Army's way of war.**

*The Soviet army rigidly adhered to a big-war paradigm: “The Soviets invaded Afghanistan using the same military tactics as in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.” What’s more, the same officer who commanded the Czechoslovakian invasion, General Ivan Pavlovsky, also commanded the initial incursion into Afghanistan.*

parachute regiment, the Chechen forces’ skillful resistance in Grozny compelled the Russian forces to fall back from the city’s center to regroup. Firing from all sides and from all floors, from city block to city block, Chechen antiarmor teams systematically destroyed a large number of Russian tanks with RPG-7s. In fact, during the New Year’s Eve assault, one Russian regiment lost 102 out of 120 vehicles as well as most of its officers.<sup>15</sup>

The 1994-1996 conflict in Chechnya witnessed the massive use of Russian technology and firepower—carpet bombings and massive artillery strikes—the application of which exhibited little concern for civilian casualties or collateral damage. On the other hand, for the rest of the war, the Chechen forces avoided direct battles and isolated Russian forces into smaller detachments that could be ambushed and destroyed piecemeal. For the Russians, unskilled in counterinsurgency techniques and nuances, massed artillery became the substitute for infantry maneuver, and the conventional principle of the offensive “came to be interpreted as the tons of ordnance dropped on target.”<sup>16</sup> It seems, then, that instead of adopting the preferred counterinsurgent approach of separating the guerrillas from the people, the Russians in Chechnya tried to destroy the population, guerrillas and all.

The fact that the Russians’ technological and numerical superiority did not enable them to achieve their objectives only highlights technology’s chimerical nature. One author writes: “Technology offers little decisive

## Is World Opinion Important?

Edward Bernard Glick

In the war against terrorism, the United States worries too much about international coalitions, just as it does about world public opinion. There is nothing wrong with building a coalition, whether against the al-Qaeda’s Osama bin Laden or against Iraq’s Saddam Hussein. But before it crafts a coalition, the United States should first inoculate itself against “coalitionitis,” a potentially crippling politico-military disease that lets the most diffident members of an alliance diminish American resolve and results.

In the current phase of the antiterrorist war, when all is said and done, Pakistan and Uzbekistan are the only countries in Central Asia that are cooperating with the United States. Great Britain is its only true ally in Europe. And Turkey and Israel—which have more experience fighting terrorism than any other nation on Earth—are its only reliable partners in the Middle East.

As for international public opinion, nothing delights good people more than seeking solutions that are acceptable to it. Yet, nothing is more difficult for them to grasp than the myths and realities of international public opinion. In the heat of an issue, how many people realize that world public opinion is not based on a universally agreed-upon value system, that it is not always objective, that it is difficult to define, that

it is easily manufactured or manipulated, that it is fragmented and ephemeral, that it has a very short memory, and that it can often turn out to be wrong?

Take the matter of definition. How does, or should, one define world public opinion on a given issue? By the level of violence committed in its name? By its loudness? By its repetition? By its media coverage? By the language and number of resolutions the United Nations has adopted on the issue? By the tally of states invoking it on a particular side of an issue? By the total population of those countries?

Or take the fickle and forgetful nature of world public opinion. The Russia that international opinion condemned decades ago for invading Hungary and Czechoslovakia is the same Russia that was hailed for its anti-Israel attitude during those decades. The world public opinion that condemned U.S. intervention in Vietnam is the same public opinion that ignored China when it conquered Tibet. The intellectuals who condemned America’s sometime use of nonlethal tear gas during the Vietnam war were the same ones who were silent when Iraq used lethal poison gas during the Iraq-Iran war. In short, world public opinion, to the extent that it exists, is always conditioned by multiple perceptions of democracy,

advantage in guerrilla warfare, urban combat, peace operations, and combat in rugged terrain. The weapon of choice in these conditions remains copious quantities of well-trained infantrymen.”<sup>17</sup> Guerrilla war is more a test of national will and endurance than it is a military contest.

### **Asymmetry of Will**

*As far back as two millennia, the professional, salaried, pensioned, and career-minded citizen-soldiers of the Roman legions routinely had to fight against warriors eager to die gloriously for tribe or religion. Already then, their superiors were far from indifferent to the casualties of combat, if only because trained troops were very costly and citizen manpower was very scarce.*<sup>18</sup>

This quotation highlights a profound disparity that characterizes differences between imperial powers and nonimperial powers. Imperial powers are unable or unwilling to accept high casualties indefinitely in peripheral wars. The weaker side’s will is sometimes manifested by a high threshold of pain that enables small powers to succeed against big powers. Samuel B. Griffith II explains: “Guerrilla war is not dependent for success on the efficient operation of complex mechanical devices, highly organized logistical systems, or the accuracy of electronic computers. Its basic element is man, and man is more complex than any of his machines. He is endowed with intelligence, emotion, and *will* (author’s italics).”<sup>19</sup>

*Since Somalia, the United States’ use of force has appeared to be even more restricted by a zero-deaths syndrome. Another manifestation was Kosovo where an air campaign exacerbated the notion of using force without bleeding. Moreover, the U.S. forces that deployed to Kosovo to conduct peace operations had no friendly casualties as their most important criterion for success.*

self-determination, wars of national liberation, colonialism, and imperialism.

Clearly, when a democracy such as the United States enters a war, it is obliged to debate, explain, and, if possible, justify its actions. But when Thomas Jefferson admonished his countrymen in the Declaration of Independence to afford “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind,” he did not mean that the United States should be blindly obedient to mankind’s opinions.

Americans should be particularly wary of European public opinion. Europe’s elites, particularly on the left, have always been publicly contemptuous, but privately jealous, of the United States. They have mocked its dynamism, openness, diversity, informality, social mobility, and appeal to the world’s masses. Despite the fact that America saved Europe in World Wars I and II, leaving thousands of U.S. soldiers buried in its military graveyards, Europe cannot accept that history has forced it to cede to the New World the Old World’s cultural, diplomatic, economic, and military dominance in global affairs. When European intellectuals and their U.S. counterparts proclaim that the people of the world hate America, they forget that Americans are not paying money to have someone smuggle them into other countries. Rather,

citizens of other countries are paying fortunes, sometimes risking life and limb, to be smuggled into the United States.

As for Arab public opinion and Arab emigration into the United States, Fouad Ajami, professor of Middle Eastern studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, has observed that “something is amiss in an Arab world that besieges American embassies for visas and at the same time celebrates America’s calamities.”

It will not be true forever, but for the present, America is the only great power the dictionary defines as a state powerful enough to influence events throughout the world. That means, in essence, that whether it is fighting nonstate terrorists or trying to prevent rogue states from using weapons of mass destruction, America should do what it must do, even if from time to time it defies the voices of so-called world public opinion.

*Edward Bernard Glick is professor emeritus of political science at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He received a B.A. from Brooklyn College and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Florida, Gainesville. He has published several books on the U.S. military and on Israel and its army.*

*An asymmetric struggle implies that the war for the indigenous insurgents is total but that it is inherently limited for the great power. This is because the insurgents pose no direct threat to the great power's survival. Moreover, for the great power in an asymmetric situation, full military mobilization is neither politically prudent nor militarily necessary. The disparity in military capabilities is so great and the confidence that military power will predominate is so acute that the great power expects victory.*

All asymmetric conflicts exhibit this same disparity of will. No single phrase better captures this disparity than this question posed in “Gardens of Stone,” a movie about the Vietnam war: “How do you *beat* an enemy who is *willing* to fight helicopters with bows and arrows?”<sup>20</sup> In Vietnam, enemy tactics seemed “to be motivated by a desire to impose casualties on Americans regardless of the cost to themselves.”<sup>21</sup> According to one RAND analysis of Vietnam, the enemy was “willing to suffer losses at a far greater rate than our own, but he has not accepted these losses as decisive and refuses to sue for peace.”<sup>22</sup> In Somalia, the enemy used slingshots against helicopters and used women and children as human shields during firefights.

Asymmetric conflict is not limited to military operations on the battlefield. The weak opponent looks to affect the great power’s domestic cohesion, imposing a continual aggregation of costs on its adversaries.<sup>23</sup> From a strategic perspective, the rebels’ aim must be to provoke the great power into escalating the conflict. Escalation produces political and economic costs to the external power—soldiers killed and equipment destroyed—but over time, these may be considered to be too high when the great power’s security is not directly threatened.

This problem was particularly acute during the Vietnam war when the Clausewitzian-minded U.S. security establishment incorrectly determined that destroying North Vietnam’s means of waging war would affect its will to wage war. Even though the United States dropped more than 7 million tons of bombs on Indochina—more than 300 times the impact of the atomic bombs that fell on Japan—North Vietnam’s will was resolute, but the United States’ will wavered. Lacking the military means to destroy the United States’ ability to wage war, Ho Chi Min and General Vo Nguyen Giap correctly focused on U.S. domestic political resolve to continue to support the war. Mao expressed this as “the destruction of the unity of the enemy,” but another author explains it even more lucidly: “If the external power’s will to continue the struggle is destroyed, then its military capability—no matter how powerful—is totally irrelevant.”<sup>24</sup>

Big powers are less tolerant of casualties in small wars than their opponents are. This disparity arose again, this time during the U.S. Army’s participation in Somalia: “The enthusiasm of the nation to take an active hand in crafting a new International order through the agency of the UN and multilateral operations, never strong to begin with, died along with 18 of America’s soldiers on the streets of Mogadishu.”<sup>25</sup> The Army’s operations there culminated with the 3-4 October 1993 battle in Mogadishu that left 18 U.S. soldiers killed and 84 wounded, compared to 312 Somalis killed and 814 wounded. The United States’ entire involvement in Somalia witnessed at least 30 U.S. troops killed and more than 100 wounded whereas Somali casualties ranged between 1,000 and 3,000. However, 4 days after the ill-fated raid, President William J. Clinton announced the end of U.S. involvement in Somalia, “ostensibly because of the public’s adverse reaction to the casualties.”<sup>26</sup> Since Somalia, the United States’ use of force has appeared to be even more restricted by a zero-deaths syndrome. Another manifestation was Kosovo where an air campaign exacerbated the notion of using force without bleeding. Moreover, the U.S. forces that deployed



to Kosovo to conduct peace operations had no friendly casualties as their most important criterion for success.

### **Embedded Conventionality**

Great powers tend to exhibit homogeneity of military thought. Since the Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian War, big powers have embraced Carl von Clausewitz as the quintessential oracle of war, and they continue to espouse a German-originated theoretical approach to both conventional and mechanized maneuver warfare. However, one can also discern in great powers' military cultures a singularly Jominian trait to separate the political sphere from the military sphere once the war begins. This creates two problems for great powers in asymmetric conflicts: poor or nonexistent politico-military integration and a go-with-what-you-know approach that translates into the preferred paradigm—mid- or high-intensity conventional war. Add to this the tendency of large organizations to change very slowly, and the result is a military that clings to a conventional approach in situations where a conventional approach is not appropriate or effective such as during asymmetric conflicts.<sup>27</sup>

Nowhere was this more manifest than in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet army that invaded Afghanistan was not trained to conduct counterguerrilla operations but to conduct conventional high-intensity warfare on European plains. Author Scott McIntosh stated: “[Soviet doctrine placed] a premium on mass, echelonment, rapid maneuver, heavy fire support, high rates of advance and coordinated, combined arms actions at all levels.”<sup>28</sup> The Soviet army did not have the doctrine or the skill set to fight an unconventional war. There were no

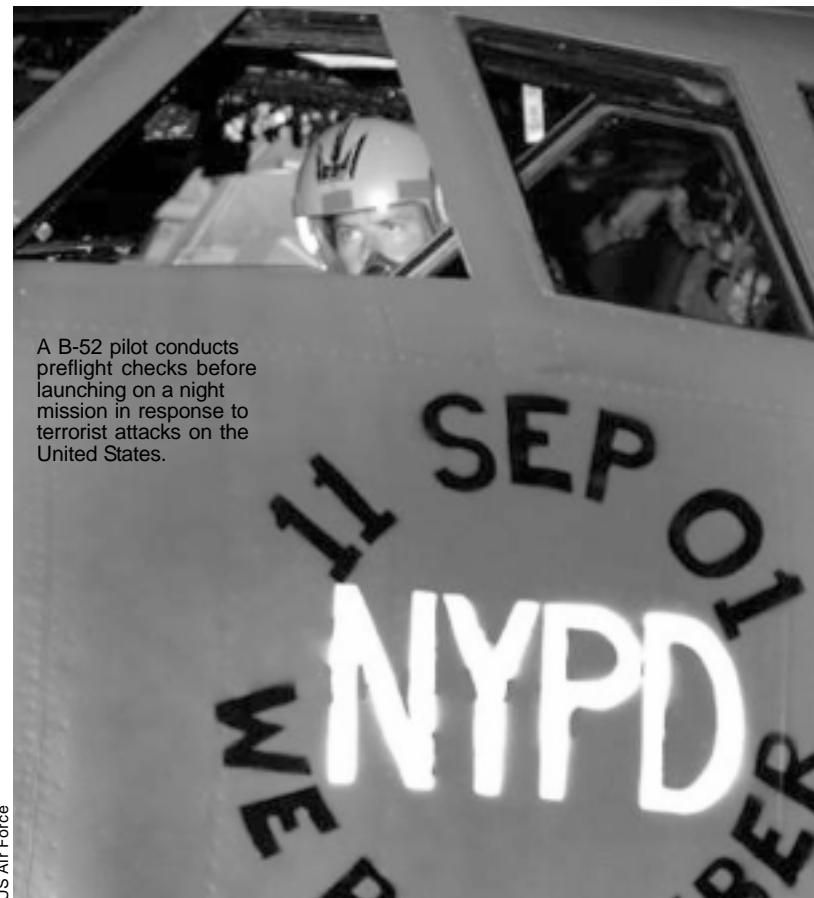
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conventional fronts or rears to penetrate with massed advances of heavy armored forces; instead, the Soviets faced an unorthodox, tenacious, and elusive enemy in difficult, mountainous terrain. The goal of a quick and decisive victory quickly became unrealistic.

The Soviet army rigidly adhered to a big-war paradigm: “The Soviets invaded Afghanistan using the same military tactics as in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.”<sup>29</sup> What’s more, the same officer who commanded the Czechoslovakian invasion, General Ivan Pavlovsky, also commanded the initial incursion into Afghanistan. The Soviet army conducted large-scale armor warfare up until 1982. About twice a year, the Soviets conducted huge conventional offensives, using motorized rifle divisions trained for battle against NATO in central Europe rather than using their lighter and better-suited airborne units. The excessive force and indiscriminate destruction that this approach entailed, however, did not win hearts and minds. The Soviets’ scorched-earth approach of the mid-1980s stiffened rebel resistance.

Vietnam was also essentially a counterguerrilla war until the United States tried to transform it into something it was not by “Americanizing” it. In fact, in 1961 and 1962, U.S. Army Special Forces initially met with some success using proven counterinsurgency techniques such as aggressive small-unit patrolling, intelligence gathering, and winning hearts and minds. By the end of 1962, the Special Forces had recovered and secured several hundred villages from the Vietcong. Moreover, the U.S. Marines operating in the I Corps area employed similar techniques with their combined actions platoons, achieving local success for most of the war. However, General William C. Westmoreland’s team tended to marginalize both the Special Forces’ efforts and the Marines’ combined actions platoon program because both were inconsistent with his concept of the U.S. Army’s way of war: conventional, lots of firepower, and harnessing technology to search and destroy.

It has been argued that the U.S. Army never seriously attempted counterinsurgency in Vietnam. Its lack of flexibility was summed up in the remark at the beginning of this article: “I will be damned if I will permit the U.S. Army, its institutions, its doctrine, and its traditions to be destroyed just to win this lousy war.”<sup>30</sup> The American victory over the Germans and Japanese during World War II “had been so absolute, so brilliantly American, that the notion of losing a war was unthinkable.”<sup>31</sup> The solution for that war’s victory, “superior firepower, superior manpower, superior technology,” became the formula for victory for the rest of the century and encouraged commanding generals in Vietnam “willfully to underestimate their enemies and over-estimate their own battlefield prowess.”<sup>32</sup> The U.S. Army was unable to adapt to the kind of war the North Vietnamese and Vietcong conducted. “By its more conventional response, its strategy of attrition and the unceasing quest for the big set-piece battle, the Army became, in effect, a large French Expeditionary Corps—and met the same frustrations.”<sup>33</sup> The U.S. Army placed marginal emphasis on unconventional warfare doctrine. With scant interest or recent practice in counterinsurgency on a large scale—and few recognizable payoffs in career promotions or annual budget allocations—the evolving U.S. Army strategy was predictable. “The Army was going to use a sledgehammer to crush a fly, while the practice of



US Air Force

A B-52 pilot conducts preflight checks before launching on a night mission in response to terrorist attacks on the United States.

unconventional war was left largely to the Special Forces.<sup>34</sup>

The good news is that after more than a decade of doing things other than war, U.S. military culture is changing—it is becoming more disposed to operations outside its historical paradigm. This is manifest, in particular, by the fact that the Army's core leaders are reflecting and effecting changed attitudes toward peace operations. In a U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) report that interviewed a group of general officers, General Eric K. Shinseki observed that he had to face a cultural bias in Bosnia because “Army doctrine-based training prepared him for war fighting at all levels, but there wasn’t a clear doctrine for stability operations.”<sup>35</sup> However, as the current Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, Shinseki is driving change in the Army’s mind-set and force structure to make it more strategically relevant. The USIP report also concluded that peace operations are “the new paradigm of conflict that will confront the army in future deployments as more failed states emerge and peace enforcement and nation-building become staples of the senior military leadership diet.”<sup>36</sup> In another study, the former Implementation Force chief of staff expressed the need to “build a military capable of many things—not just the high end.”<sup>37</sup>

In October 2001, the U.S. military prosecuted an effective and unprecedented strategy against the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Combining precision bombing and employing Special Forces in an unconventional warfare role, the U.S. military essentially decapitated the oppressive Taliban rule there. However, the U.S. war in

*Combining precision bombing and employing Special Forces in an unconventional warfare role, the U.S. military essentially decapitated the oppressive Taliban rule there. However, the U.S. war in Afghanistan is different from the examples discussed here in one significant way. In the war against terrorism, U.S. military forces are defending the United States’ vital interests. In this respect, this war has more in common with World War II than it does with Vietnam or Somalia. It is a war as a crusade against a nonstate actor that attacked and continues to threaten the U.S. homeland.*

*Asymmetric conflict is not limited to military operations on the battlefield. The weak opponent looks to affect the great power's domestic cohesion, imposing a continual aggregation of costs on its adversaries. From a strategic perspective, the rebels' aim must be to provoke the great power into escalating the conflict. Escalation produces political and economic costs to the external power—soldiers killed and equipment destroyed—but over time, these may be considered to be too high when the great power's security is not directly threatened.*

Afghanistan is different from the examples discussed here in one significant way. In the war against terrorism, U.S. military forces are defending the United States' vital interests. In this respect, this war has more in common with World War II than it does with Vietnam or Somalia. It is a war as a crusade against a nonstate actor that attacked and continues to threaten the U.S. homeland.

Both the United States and al-Qaeda appear to be fighting to achieve unlimited ends: the United States is trying to eradicate the al-Qaeda terror network around the globe, and the enemy wants to get the United States out of the Middle East and East Asia. In this case, the U.S. public will probably continue to tolerate casualties and to support a protracted counterterror war because it is clear that this effort is defending U.S. vital interests. For the same reason, U.S. political leaders agree and have resolved to successfully conclude this war.

The war in Afghanistan is distinct in another important way. The first, and most successful, campaign there was U.S. special operations troops operating in a proinsurgent role—the U.S. military initially was the guerrilla. Being the guerrilla and countering the guerrilla are two very different things. Since the beginning of 2002, however, the U.S. military has conducted counterguerrilla operations in eastern Afghanistan. Although the final outcome is yet to be determined, an approach that combines intelligence, small special-unit actions, and precision bombing has been successful inside Afghanistan.

However, the potential for safe haven for the Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters along the porous and sparsely guarded 1,300-mile Pakistani border seems to have been realized since Pakistani national police sources estimate that as many as 10,000 Taliban cadres and 5,000 al-Qaeda fighters are hiding in sanctuaries inside Pakistan. This situation presents a vexing conundrum: whose forces can and will search out the 15,000 enemy soldiers who are being harbored inside a friendly state by and among the 1 percent of the population who are Islamic extremists and the 15 percent of the population who are anti-American.<sup>38</sup> If it is at all possible that U.S. forces may enter Pakistan to help that government isolate and eradicate these 10 to 15,000 jihadist guerrillas, there are some lessons from another war in Asia more than a quarter of a century ago that can help show the United States what not to do.

Of all the services, the U.S. Marine Corps seems to be the best incubator for serious thought about small wars. The Marines sponsored two works on small wars that are worthy of dusting off as the U.S. military continues its global fight against al-Qaeda guerrillas. The first is a U.S. Marine Corps primer that was published in 1962, *The Guerrilla—and How to Fight Him*, and the second is the 1940 U.S. Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual*.<sup>39</sup> The latter offers timeless guidelines and techniques for conducting counterguerrilla operations: "In small wars, caution must be exercised, and instead of striving to generate the maximum power with the forces available, the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force. In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population. Small wars involve a wide range of activities including diplomacy, contacts with the civil population and warfare of the most difficult kind."<sup>40</sup> **MR**

## NOTES

1. This quote, attributed to an anonymous U.S. Army general, is from Brian M. Jenkins, *The Unchangeable War*, RM-6278-ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1970), 3.
2. Harvey M. Sapolsky, "On the Theory of Military Innovation," *Breakthroughs* (Spring 2000), 35 and 38.
3. To win or to be effective in the context of counterinsurgency or low-intensity conflict (LIC) is subjective and relative. However, although diverse missions comprise the realm of LIC/operations other than war, a general corpus of principles has emerged from a legacy of experiences in operations short of war. To be effective, doctrine in this area should help promote two central aims: to integrate military, political, economic, and social objectives, moving them toward the desired strategic outcome and to gain and maintain support of the indigenous population.
4. Based on Andrew Mack, "Why Big Powers Lose Small Wars: the Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *Power, Strategy, and Security: A World Politics Reader*, Klaus Knorr, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 126-51. This implies a qualitative and quantitative superiority by empirical conventional measures of military capabilities only.
5. These battles witnessed European armies handily and brutally defeating their non-European adversaries because the latter chose, imprudently, to fight the former symmetrically. See Winston S. Churchill, *The River War* (London: Pion, 1997), 191-225 and Daniel P. Bolger, "The Ghosts of Omdurman," *Parameters* (Autumn 1991), 34, for an analysis of the Battle of Omdurman. Mao Tse-tung, *On Protracted Warfare* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 9-10.
6. Once again, inferior connotes a weakness in conventional measures of military might, not necessarily in strategy, tactics, and warrior skills. Asymmetric conflict was also the norm during the Cold War and throughout U.S. history. During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear escalation precluded a symmetric conflict between the two superpowers.
7. The term "asymmetric conflict" first appeared in Andrew Mack, "The Concept of Power and Its Uses in Explaining Asymmetric Conflict" (London: Richardson Institute for Conflict and Peace Research, 1974).
8. Henry Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* (January 1969), 214.
9. B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 26. Fabian connotes an indirect strategic use of force and stems from Roman General Quintus Fabius Maximus who protracted the war against Hannibal in the Second Punic War by avoiding decisive battles.
10. Ibid., 27.
11. Russell F. Weigley, "American Strategy From its Beginnings Through the First World War," *Makers of Modern Strategy*, Peter Paret, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 410-12; Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (IN: Indiana University Press, 1 September 1977) 5, 15, and 18-19. See Mack, "Why Big Powers Lose Small Wars," 145-46.
12. Ibid., 410-11 and Ibid., 18, 23-24, 26, and 29.
13. Sean J.A. Edwards, *Mars Unmasked: the Changing Face of Urban Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), 28.
14. Mack, "Why Big Powers Lose Small Wars," 128 and 133.
15. Timothy Thomas, "The Caucasus Conflict and Russian Security: The Russian Armed Forces Confront Chechnya," Part III (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office [FMSO], 1997), 6; Raymond Finch, "Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: FMSO, 1997), 4-7; and Gregory J. Celestan, "Wounded Bear: The On-going Russian Military Operation in Chechnya" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: FMSO, 1996), 4.
16. Finch, 5-6 and Celestan, 5. Wiping out the noncombatant population is not the preferred solution in counterinsurgency. To counter Mao's approach, which the people in a guerrilla war are "likened to water" and the guerrillas are likened "to the fish who inhabit it," most counterinsurgency experts would assert the necessity of separating the fish from the water by winning the hearts and minds of the population. For Mao's fish and water simile, see Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Samuel B. Griffith II, trans. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 93.
17. Lester W. Grau, "Bashing the Laser Range Finder With a Rock" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: FMSO, 1997), 4.
18. Edward N. Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 1995), 116.
19. Samuel B. Griffith II, "Introduction" in Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 7.
20. Francis Ford Coppola, "Gardens of Stone," produced by Columbia TriStar Home Video, 111 minutes, 1987, video-cassette.
21. Jenkins, 3.
22. Ibid., 4.
23. Mack, "Why Big Powers Lose Small Wars," 128, 130, and 132-33.
24. Ibid., 129-30 and Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 90. For tons of bombs dropped on Vietnam, see John G. Stoessinger, *Why Nations Go to War*, 5th ed. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), 111-12.
25. Anonymous U.S. senator cited in Edward Foster, *NATO's Military in the Age of Crisis Management* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1995), 13.
26. For casualty figures, see Susan Rosegrant and Michael D. Watkins, *A Seamless Transition: United States and United Nations Operations in Somalia 1992-1993* (B) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996), 12-16 and Rick Atkinson, "Night of a Thousand Casualties," *Washington Post*, 31 January 1994, A01; Don M. Snider, John A. Nagl, and Tony Pfaff, *Army Professionalism, the Military Ethic, and Officers in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1999), 23. This is not necessarily true in Afghanistan, however, where the American public and political elite seem to be more tolerant toward casualties because the war is a crusade against an unambiguous, direct threat to U.S. security.
27. For a discussion of the professionalization and homogenization of Western militaries, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 46-65. Some would argue that A.A. Svechin and V.K. Triandafilov are the true-faith apostles of operational art and maneuver warfare. However, two Germans, Sigismund von Schlichting and Helmuth von Moltke, the elder, were among the first military thinkers to recognize the shift away from the Napoleonic (Clausewitzian) paradigm that the American Civil War had signaled. See James J. Schneider, *The Structure of Strategic Revolution* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), 168-77.
28. Scott E. McIntosh, "Leading With the Chin: Using Svechin to Analyze the Soviet Incursion Into Afghanistan, 1979-1989," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (June 1995), 420.
29. Olivier Roy, *The Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War*, Adelphi Paper 259 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1991), 16 and 18. It is hard to miss the similarity and the concomitant irony between the name Pavlovsky and Pavlov. In some manner, the Soviet army in Afghanistan acted like Pavlov's dogs, exhibiting a conditioned response, however inappropriate.
30. Jenkins.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid. and Rick Atkinson, *The Long Gray Line* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989), 82.
33. Peter M. Dunn, "The American Army: The Vietnam War, 1965-1973," *Armed Forces and Modern Counter-Insurgency*, Ian F.W. Beckett and John Pimlott, eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1985), 84.
34. Ibid., 85.
35. General Eric K. Shinseki, Interview, 14 January 1999, in Howard Olsen and John Davis, "Training U.S. Army Officers for Peace Operations," *Special Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1999), 2.
36. Ibid., 3.
37. Edith B. Wilkie and Beth C. DeGrasse, *A Force for Peace: U.S. Commanders' Views of the Military's Role in Peace Operations* (Washington, DC: Peace Through Law Education Fund, 1999), 40.
38. Arnaud de Borchgrave, "Al Qaeda's Privileged Sanctuary," *Washington Times*, 20 June 2002, 19.
39. Krepinevich, 70-71 and 172-77, and *The Guerrilla—And How to Fight Him*, T.N. Greene, ed. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1962).
40. U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 31-32.

**The term "asymmetric"**  
**has come to include so many**  
**approaches that it has lost its**  
**utility and clarity. For example,**  
**one article described Japan's**  
**World War II direct attack on**  
**Pearl Harbor as conventional**  
**but its indirect attack against**  
**British conventional forces in**  
**Singapore as asymmetric.**  
**So encompassing a definition**  
**diminishes the term's utility.**

Major Robert M. Cassidy, U.S. Army, is the S3, 4th Aviation Brigade, 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Hood, Texas. He holds a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and is a graduate of the French Joint Defense College, Paris. He previously served as assistant professor of international relations, Department of Social Sciences, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York.